

Early Prisoner Release due to COVID-19: Effects of Psychoeducation on Canadians' Opinions

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ABSTRACT Due to high rates of infection and contagion of the COVID-19 virus in Canadian prisons, the Parole Board of Canada implemented new guidelines to facilitate the early release of low-risk prisoners to limit the spread of novel coronavirus. This study examines Canadians' opinions regarding the early release of prisoners from correctional institutions due to COVID-19 and seeks to discover if psychoeducational intervention can positively alter these opinions. Additionally, level of education was examined to ascertain whether years of formal education influenced openness to change. Data from 286 Canadians was collected using an online survey and found that overall, opinions towards the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 were negative. It was also found that psychoeducational intervention was an effective way to improve attitudes towards the early release of prisoners and that those with a higher level of education were not more affected by psychoeducational intervention than those with a lower level of education; however, it was noted that those with a higher level of education expressed less concern overall regarding the increase of released offenders in the community.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) implemented guidelines to allow provincial/territorial and federal prisons to release certain inmates early upon meeting set criteria to limit the spread of COVID-19. Inmates who were deemed at risk of experiencing severe negative effects of COVID-19, met parole requirements, and were nearing the end of their sentence had the potential to be granted early release or a temporary absence (Government of Canada, 2020). At risk inmates were defined by the Canadian Human Rights Commission as those who were older adults, pregnant, those with serious medical conditions, and those with children (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2020). Additionally, bail was granted to an increased number of low-risk offenders – offenders with a low probability of reoffending – to reduce crowding in holding facilities (Ontario Court of Justice, 2020). These guidelines allowed the PBC to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by protecting those who were most at risk of contracting the virus. As a result of the guidelines, there was a notable decrease in federal and provincial prison populations by approximately 6000 inmates between the months of February and April 2020, as well as an approximate 25% decline in provincial/territorial prison populations (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Research has found that continual close contact amongst prisoners and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic was unavoidable due to the crowded nature of correctional institutions (Vose et al., 2020). Thus, if even one prisoner or staff member were to become infected with the virus, the entirety of the prison population would be at a high risk of infection. One of the only reliable solutions to this issue was to reduce the total population in prisons. This would allow for proper social distancing measures to be put in place along with enhanced sanitization to reduce potential points of infection (Vose et al., 2020).

As a result of the decision to release certain inmates early to reduce the spread of COVID-19, Canadians have voiced their concerns at the increased number of convicted offenders released into the community (Gillis, 2020). We consider this to stem largely from misconceptions spread and perpetuated by popular media about who is being released and why. News media often overrepresent the proportion of violent crimes and crimes committed by people of colour, contradicting official crime statistics which demonstrate that crimes of these types are in the minority (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007). However, psychoeducational interventions, such as empirically supported informational articles, have been shown to improve negative attitudes towards offenders that were perpetuated by the

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media (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; *N* = 410). Furthermore, a study by Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) found that increased knowledge of sex offender recidivism rates, treatment outcomes, and current supervision practices played a significant role in improved attitudes towards sex offenders (*N* = 559). Psychoeducational intervention is a form of intervention, often used in therapy, which educates individuals on psychological concepts to improve knowledge and attitudes towards treatment programs (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012; Rosselli and Jeglic, 2017).

In relation to attitudes regarding convicted offenders, public opinions towards offenders and offender treatment are typically negative (Corabian & Hogan, 2015; Kerr et al., 2018). A study by Kerr et al. (2018) demonstrated that the Canadian public typically perceives offenders as having little capacity to change and supports offender incapacitation as a primary form of treatment (*N* = 170). Furthermore, Kerr et al. (2018) found that Canadians typically overestimate recidivism rates and that negative attitudes towards offenders can adversely impact practices surrounding reintegration and rehabilitation of offenders (*N* = 170). Notably, it has been found that individuals with a higher level of education are more tolerant of offenders (Kozloski, 2010). A positive correlation between higher education and generally more liberal opinions has also been reported (Weakliem, 2002). Furthermore, individuals who are more conservative tend to have more prejudiced attitudes towards ex-offenders and are more likely to endorse negative stereotypes (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). More specifically, a study by Rosselli and Jeglic (2017) found that participants who were more conservative were more likely to believe in harmful stereotypes towards sex offenders, such as the belief that sex offenders have a high likelihood of reoffending. Additionally, it was found that conservative individuals were significantly less likely to demonstrate improved attitudes toward sex offenders regardless of their level of knowledge concerning offender recidivism and treatment outcomes (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). It could therefore be concluded that individuals with a higher level of education tend to be more liberal and subsequently are more likely to have an improved attitude towards offenders. Furthermore, individuals with a higher level of formal education have been reported to be more tolerant of out-groups such as criminal offenders (Kozloski, 2010).

Currently, there is no literature which examines Canadians' opinions on the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19. As such, no research has been done to study the effects of psychoeducational intervention on these opinions. The purpose of this study is to address these gaps. Additionally, this study seeks to examine the influence of level of formal education on openness to opinion change regarding the early release of prisoners. It is hypothesized that opinions regarding the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 will be largely negative as has been seen in previous research (Corabian & Hogan, 2015; Kerr et al., 2018). Additionally, it is hypothesized that psychoeducational intervention will be an effective way to positively influence opinions regarding the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 as found in previous research (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012). Finally, it is hypothesized that those with a higher level of education will be more accepting of the new PBC guidelines and more likely to change their opinion toward the early release of prisoners as a result of psychoeducational intervention (Weakliem, 2002). Data will be collected using an online survey designed for this study.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 289 participants were recruited through the digital learning management system of Red Deer College. Undergraduate students from Red Deer College participated in this study for course credit. Additionally, social media, specifically Instagram, was used to recruit people from outside of the college community to participate. All Canadian citizens aged 18 and older were eligible to participate in the study; however, anyone who had previously been imprisoned before or during the survey period was ineligible to participate. Upon completion of the survey, all participants had the option to enter a draw for a \$25 Tim Hortons gift card. Three participants were removed from all analyses as they reported to work in the criminal justice system. These participants were removed to eliminate potential bias. As such, all analyses were run on *N* = 286 (*M* age = 26.10, *SD* = 10.19)

Materials

Question	1	2	3	4	5
1. How knowledgeable would you say you are regarding the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?	No Knowledge	Slightly Knowledgeable	Somewhat Knowledgeable	Moderately Knowledgeable	Extremely knowledgeable
2. How supportive are you regarding the practice of the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?	Strongly Oppose	Somewhat Oppose	Neither oppose or support	Somewhat Support	Strongly Support
3. How concerned are you regarding the repercussions of the early release of inmates and charged persons during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Not at all concerned	Slightly concerned	Somewhat concerned	Moderately concerned	Extremely concerned
4. How much confidence would you say you have in the Parole Board of Canada in managing the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?	Not at all confident	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Moderately confident	Extremely confident
5. Knowing what you know now about the controlled release of inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic has your level of support changed at all?	Significantly less supportive	Somewhat less supportive	No change	Somewhat more supportive	Significantly more supportive
6. Do you feel the guidelines put in place by the Parole Board of Canada regarding conditions of early release should be more or less strict?	Significantly more strict	Somewhat more strict	No change is needed	Somewhat less strict	Significantly less strict
7. Knowing what you know now, how concerned are you regarding the repercussions of the early release of inmates and charged persons during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Not at all concerned	Slightly Concerned	Somewhat concerned	Moderately concerned	Extremely concerned

Table 1 Survey Questions and Answer Options.

This study utilized a 13-question online survey which was constructed for this study. The survey contained three demographic questions (age, province, and level of education), one question to ascertain participants' primary sources of information ("What are your primary sources for information regarding the controlled release of inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic?"), one yes-no exclusionary question about previous imprisonment ("Have you previously been or are you currently incarcerated?"), and seven five-point Likert scale questions to evaluate opinions on the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 (Table 1). Psychoeducational intervention was presented through a paragraph of information regarding the PBC's new guidelines that participants were required to read halfway through the survey. The paragraph outlined the type of prisoners being released and the justifications presented by the PBC to educate participants on the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19. Data was collected with the online application Simple Survey (simplesurvey.com, Quebec, Canada). The full survey is available through the corresponding author.

Procedure

Participants gave informed consent prior to completing the online survey. Participants completed the survey self-paced on their personal devices. On average, survey completion took 5-10 minutes. Participants could choose to submit their name to be entered in a \$25 Tim Hortons gift card giveaway, but all data was processed anonymously. Additionally, Red Deer College undergraduate students could enter their names and course information to receive a 1% bonus credit.

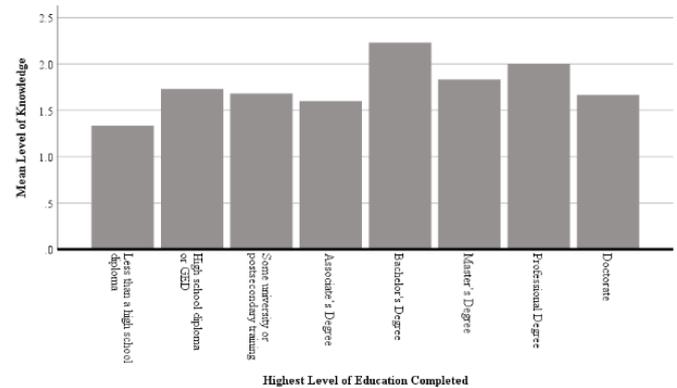
Question	Mean	SD
Q1	1.58	0.494
Q2	1.74	0.892
Q3	2.59	1.115
Q4	3.06	1.144
Q5	2.39	1.075
Q6	3.34	0.762
Q7	2.24	0.797
Q8	2.63	1.092

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations of Survey Questions. Q1 = Were you aware that during the COVID-19 pandemic, eligible individuals charged and awaiting trial, as well as inmates serving in provincial and federal prisons across Canada, were released early to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?; Q2 = How knowledgeable would you say you are regarding the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?; Q3 = How supportive are you regarding the practice of the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?; Q4 = How concerned are you regarding the repercussions of the early release of inmates and charged persons during the COVID-19 pandemic?; Q5 = How much confidence would you say you have in the Parole Board of Canada in managing the controlled release of inmates and charged persons to combat the spread of novel coronavirus?; Q6 = Knowing what you know now about the controlled release of inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic, has your level of support changed at all?; Q7 = Do you feel the guidelines put in place by the Parole Board of Canada regarding conditions of early release should be more or less strict?; Q8 = Knowing what you know now, how concerned are you regarding the repercussions of the early release of inmates and charged persons during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RESULTS

As seen in Table 2, participants reported being unaware that certain prisoners were being released early due to COVID-19 ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .49$; lower scores indicate less awareness), and the

participants who were aware reported being only slightly knowledgeable about the controlled release of inmate due to COVID-19 ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .89$). Participants with a bachelor's degree reported to be the most knowledgeable ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.21$; higher scores indicate feeling more knowledgeable) while participants with less than a high school diploma reported being



Note. Level of knowledge was recorded on a five-point Likert scale with one being no knowledge and five being extremely knowledgeable.

Figure 1 Knowledge of the Early Release of Prisoners by Education Level. The level of knowledge was recorded on a five-point Likert scale with one being no knowledge and five being extremely knowledgeable

least knowledgeable ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .58$): see Figure 1. Additionally, participants reported a desire for stricter guidelines to be put in place by the PBC regarding conditions of early release ($M = 2.24$, $SD = .80$; lower scores indicate a desire for less strict guidelines), and being only slightly confident in the PBC's management of the early release of prisoners ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.08$; higher scores indicate more confidence). Participants also slightly opposed the early release of inmates to prevent the spread of COVID-19 ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.12$; lower scores indicate more opposition).

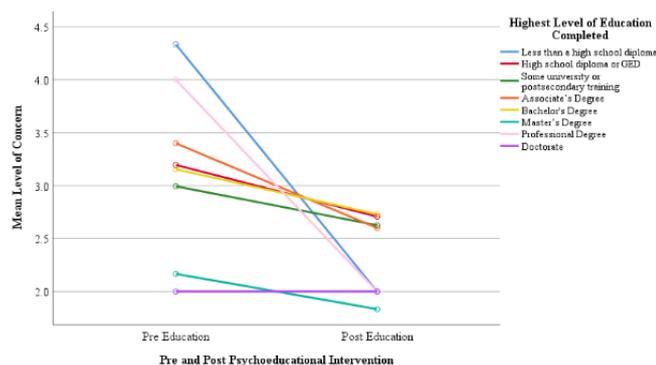
A mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between level of education and degree of opinion change as well as the relationship between pre- and post-psychoeducational intervention. As Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied. Crucially, a significant main effect of psychoeducational intervention was found, suggesting that participants were less concerned about the repercussions of early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 after the psychoeducational intervention ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.09$) relative to before the intervention ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.14$), $F(1, 281) = 21.58$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .071$. The main effect of level of education was not significant, $F(7, 281) = 1.20$, $p = .306$; however, further inspection revealed a significant interaction between pre- and post-educational intervention with level of education, suggesting that level of education played a significant role in the degree of opinion change as a result of psychoeducational intervention, $F(7, 281) = 2.20$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .052$. As displayed in Figure 2, those with the highest level of education (doctorate, PhD) reported no change in opinion. However, this level of education also reported the lowest level of concern both before and after the psychoeducational intervention ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.00$). In contrast, participants with the lowest level of education (less than a high school diploma) expressed the greatest change of opinion, progressing from the highest level of concern to the lowest level of concern ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.16$ to $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.73$). It should be noted that the level of education data was skewed towards some university or postsecondary training ($N = 163$; 56.99%). In total, there were only three participants who

reported the completion of a PhD, and one participant who reported the completion of a professional degree.

Another Spearman's correlation was computed to quantify the relationship between level of education and degree of opinion change as a result of psychoeducational intervention; however, this correlation was not significant, $r(287) = .031, p = .383$.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine Canadians' opinions regarding the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19 and to explore whether psychoeducational intervention can change these opinions. As expected, psychoeducational intervention was found to be an effective way to improve participants' opinions regarding the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19. This aligns with the findings of Kleban and Jeglic (2012), who found that brief psychoeducational intervention was an effective way to improve attitudes regarding sex offenders. However, there is still a gap in research regarding the influence of psychoeducational intervention on attitudes towards other types of offenders as well as how offence type may impact the effectiveness of psychoeducational intervention.



Note. Level of concern was recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all concerned to extremely concerned; higher scores indicate more concern.

Figure 2 Degree of Opinion Change for Varying Levels of Education. The level of concern was recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all concerned to extremely concerned; higher scores indicate more concern.

Contrary to what was expected, participants with the lowest level of education (less than a high school diploma) exhibited the greatest positive change of opinion while those with the highest level of education (PhD) exhibited no change of opinion; however, it was noted those with the highest level of education already expressed the lowest level of concern before psychoeducational intervention had occurred (See Figure 2; a pronounced floor effect). This corroborates research that suggests that individuals with a higher level of education are typically more tolerant of outgroups such as criminal offenders (Bobo & Licari, 1989; $N = 1,473$). Furthermore, because participants with the lowest level of education expressed the strongest negative opinion to begin with, they could demonstrate the highest degree of opinion change. This drastic change demonstrates that participants with the lowest level of education were the most open to changing their opinions in light of new information. However, it should be noted that level of education was disproportionately skewed towards those with some university or postsecondary training. Due to the small number of participants in the higher education levels (PhD and

professional degree), there is limited generalizability for how psychoeducation has influenced participants with these levels of education.

Despite this, participants with less than a high school diploma were shown to be least knowledgeable about the early release of prisoners (See Figure 1). Research has indicated that individuals with a lower level of education tend to be less politically involved (Brennan et al., 2015; $N = 3,300$; Statistics Netherlands, 2017). As such, participants with a lower level of education may not have paid much attention to this topic to begin with, which may explain why this group reported being less knowledgeable. Due to the lack of knowledge expressed by participants with the lowest level of education, the high degree of opinion change exhibited by this group can be attributed to the psychoeducational intervention presented through this study's survey.

Interestingly, those participants who had completed a doctorate reported the highest level of confidence in the PBC's management of the early release of prisoners. This is not in accordance with research which has found that individuals with more years of education expressed reduced confidence in government institutions (Weakliem, 2002). However, as noted, low statistical power may account for these conflicting results.

The finding that participants desired stricter guidelines to be implemented by the PBC is similar to what was found by Kleban and Jeglic (2012). Overall, attitudes towards the early release of prisoners were less negative than expected. Before the psychoeducational intervention, participants reported being only slightly opposed to the early release of prisoners. Research has suggested that the general public has become more tolerant of social outgroups in recent years (Twenge et al., 2015; $N = 35,048$; Poushter & Kent, 2020; $N = 38,426$). It can be assumed that, with the growing tolerance of social outgroups, the acceptance of ex-offenders may have also increased, hence the lack of opposition. Nevertheless, overall opinions toward the early release of prisoners were still negative, thereby explaining the desire for stricter guidelines by the PBC. However, little research has been conducted to examine how offence type may influence these changes in public perceptions over time.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were a few notable limitations to this research study. Education level was skewed towards those with some postsecondary education. As such, there was a lack of representativeness in the higher levels of education such as PhDs and professional degrees. It would be valuable to readminister this survey to a more representative sample to improve the generalizability of this study.

It may be valuable to examine whether previous exposure to crime has an impact on people's opinions regarding the early release of prisoners. Additionally, participation was restricted to those who have never been incarcerated to reduce potential biases; however, the opinions of this population may be valuable to explore in future research. Furthermore, it may be advantageous to examine the impact of offense type on the effectiveness of psychoeducational intervention in improving attitudes towards offenders. Finally, due to the skew in data towards those with some post-secondary education, it may be beneficial to examine the efficacy of psychoeducational intervention on those with a lower level of education such as less than a high school diploma. The current study has started to explore the effects of psychoeducational interventions on the opinions of people

regarding the early release of prisoners, a topic that will become increasingly important in the (post-)pandemic era.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, psychoeducational intervention was found to be an effective way to positively influence attitudes towards the early release of prisoners due to COVID-19. In particular, this study assessed psychoeducational intervention in relation to attitudes towards offenders that were at a low-risk of reoffending and high-risk of experiencing severe negative effects of COVID-19. Contrary to what was expected, those with a higher level of education did not express a greater change of opinion; however, it was noted that the highest level of education (PhD) reported the least level of concern overall both before and after psychoeducational intervention. Instead, the lowest education level (less than a high school diploma) was associated with the greatest change of opinion: these participants expressed the highest level of concern pre-intervention and the lowest level of concern post-intervention. It was believed that this was due to their lack of knowledge regarding the early release of offenders due to COVID-19 prior to this study. Finally, participants' attitudes were not as negative as expected, as only a slight opposition to the early release of prisoners was found. This study has demonstrated that psychoeducation can be an effective method to influence people's opinions about societally relevant and timely topics like early prisoner release during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the novelty of this pandemic, there is a dearth of research in this field: the current paper is among the first to address these issues.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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